

**DAMARIS KOFMEHL**



**TONY BROWN**

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**IN BETWEEN LIVING AND DYING**

**kofmehl**  
publishing

I dedicate this book to my beloved husband and best friend  
Demetri Betts, aka Tony Brown, who left us much too early.  
May his story and message live on.

Original Title: „Tony Brown - Leben verboten, sterben auch“  
German Version Published 2004 by publisher „Fontis-  
Brunnen  
Basel“, Switzerland  
English Version 2018 © by Damaris Kofmehl

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# **1 I Hate God**

I was born in jail.

Of all the places a person could wish to be born, this was surely the last place I would have chosen, if anybody had asked me about it. But nobody asked me. I never filled out a form where I could check when I wanted to be born, which social class I wanted to be born into, or what skin color or abilities I wanted to have. No one even asked if I really wanted to live. I was just born into this damn world, and now I have to see how I can cope with it.

It seems that some higher power – and if there really is one, I want nothing to do with it – took delight in dealing me the worst conceivable cards in life and then watching them destroy me. I hate my life. I hate this invisible something I have never seen, something that gives itself the right to play poker with my fate. I hate it. Or him, if it is a god. I hate him. And if I should meet him one day, maybe in the next world, if there is one, I will take him to task and ask if the macabre circus performance pleased him. Yes, I will do that. Maybe then I will understand why I cannot be like people on TV, why my life is a complete failure, why I am different from everybody else.

I long for a family, for security, for love. I long for them so much. So much. I cannot describe how much. But so far I have not found any of these things. Somewhere it says that whoever seeks, finds. God knows I have looked. But I have not found what I have been searching for. Maybe my destiny is to be homeless, a street kid, an orphan, a nothing. It would have been better for everybody if I had never been born. Nobody wants me. I do not want myself either.

What am I doing here in this world where I was not welcome from the beginning? Where I was behind bars before I could tell the difference between good and evil? Why did my story have to begin this way? Every normal story begins in the hospital with busy midwives, nurses, orderlies, doctors, and a father who holds his wife's hand in the hour of her greatest pain and joyously waits, armed with video and still cameras, for the earth's newest inhabitant. My story begins more like *Oliver Twist's*, just a century later and not in a poorhouse, but in a jail.

This is my story. An orphan's desperate search for a home.  
I wish so passionately for just this one thing.  
More than anything else in the world.

## 2 My New Family?

“Will you do it again?!”

“No, sir!”

“Oh, yes you will!” The rubber rod lashed our naked backs mercilessly, and we howled.

“Will you do it again?!” shouted our father.

“No, sir! No! No!” whimpered Donovan and I as we held on desperately to the edge of the bed.

“Oh, yes, you’ll do it again!” said Jeffrey and raised his hand for the next blow. My brother and I stood naked in front of our bunk bed, trembling like two lambs when the wolf is coming. With each stroke, the pain brought tears to my eyes, and I felt dizzy. My back burned. I could not remember when our adoptive father had questioned us so harshly. He must have had a really bad day. He was already in a lousy mood when he came home. And then Donovan made the stupid mistake of asking him a question without addressing him with ‘sir.’ That definitely made him see red.

“You impudent rascal! Is that how you speak to your father?!”

“No, sir,” answered Donovan submissively. “I’m sorry, sir.” But his mistake was inexcusable.

“I’ll teach you how to speak to your father,” said Jeffrey harshly. “March to your room!”

“He didn’t do it on purpose . . . sir!” The words slipped out, and I immediately regretted butting in.

“To your room!” snorted Jeffrey and gave me a menacing look. “You too!” A shudder ran through me. Exactly what I had done wrong, I did not know. I did know I would get a good thrashing for it, and just the thought of Father’s rod

made me weak in the knees. He pushed us into our room, and while we undressed, he rolled up his right shirtsleeve and took his infamous rod from the closet.

"You impudent kids," he said, "I really don't know why I feed you and put a roof over your heads, since you show no respect for your own father. But I'm going to teach you manners." And with that came the first blow.

"Will you do it again?!" roared Jeffrey.

"No, sir!" we answered with bowed heads, even though we both knew how this little game would continue. It had already been played too often for us to have any illusion that he would stop with a beating if we promised him we would do better.

"Oh, yes you will," he cried and hit us so hard it took our breath away. After a while, our mother Patty stuck her head in the door. She was nibbling on a cookie.

"Problems?" she asked and licked her fingers.

"A smart mouth," answered Jeffrey. His wife gave an understanding sigh.

"That's the thanks we get for all our sacrificing. You should be ashamed, boys." She turned to her husband. "Don't go easy on them, Jeffrey. We've mollycoddled them long enough." With that she turned on her heel and left us to our fate. Jeffrey laid into us until his hand got tired from so many blows. Then he sent us to bed without supper and slammed the door.

Whimpering, we crawled into bed in our underwear. I could hardly find a way to lie because of the pain. Every time I moved, it hurt. I cried softly to myself and stared at the wall, trying to understand why our adoptive parents had changed so much. Because they had not always been this way.

I remembered the first day after my adoption, when I met my new grandparents. I loved them dearly right from the first. My third birthday was two weeks later. There was a big party with lots of kids, cake, streamers and colored balloons,



and my new mommy and daddy gave me a brand-new tricycle. I also remembered a happy Christmas with a decorated Christmas tree and lots of presents. We had been a really nice, intact family. But then, for incomprehensible reasons, everything changed.

It started when we moved to a bigger house. Patty and Jeffrey had worked hard for it, had saved every penny so they could get out of their cramped little four-room house. So we moved to a rich, white residential area in Durham, into a huge house with three stories. My mother went to the university to study to become a beautician, and later she opened her own salon and named it Pat's Beauty Salon. She took a lot of trips to attend cosmetics courses and presentations on body care, cosmetic surgery, and fashion design. And my father had three different jobs and worked practically around the clock.

I cannot remember when he started beating us. But that was when our life turned into a nightmare. Jeffrey hit us with rubber rods, sticks, belts, and sometimes, if nothing else was handy, with electric cords. We were punished often, Donovan more often and more harshly than I was. Maybe because as a seven-year-old, my list of sins was not as long as my brother's. But it was long enough for me to be punished a lot. There was always a reason. He beat us if we did not do all our chores - and we had tons of chores, chores in the kitchen, in the whole house, and in the yard. He beat us if we did not bring home good grades, and that happened a lot. He beat us if he told us, "Do this!" and we answered back, "Why?" Then he would hiss, "Don't ask why! You say yes, sir, no, sir. Is that clear?" And even if we finished all our chores, did not bring home any bad grades, and obediently said "Yes, sir. No, sir!," even when we tried hard to do everything, really everything right, even then we were at the mercy of his arbitrariness and could count on being punished at any moment. That was our everyday life. We

did not know anything else. And the crazy thing was: in time, we thought of this as normal.

"Donovan," I whispered to my brother, who was lying in the upper bunk, trying to hide his crying. "Do you know our parents? I mean, our real parents?"

"Of course not," answered Donovan dryly. "Why else would we be here?"

"Is it true that our mama's in jail?"

"I don't care," said my brother. "She didn't want us."

"That's not true!" I said in her defense. "Of course she wanted us. But they took us away from her."

"Because she didn't want us, idiot!" replied Donovan, and the tone of his teary voice was strangely hard. "Nobody wants us, understand? We're a nuisance for everybody."

I did not want to believe that my brother was right. I knew that our mother wanted us. I refused to believe anything else, even though I actually knew hardly anything about her or about my own history. The only thing I knew about it was what Mrs. Brown had told me in one of her good moments.

My mother was six months pregnant when her water broke in jail and she went into labor. She begged for help, but no one came before I was born. And that is how I, Antonio Demetrius, new addition to the human race, first saw the light of day, on April 26, 1973, in the jail in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA. No one knows what happened to Mama after that. As soon as I was born, the state took me away from her, severing our connection completely. Maybe that was why I had no urge to live in my small body. Why should I have? They had taken my mama from me before I even had the chance to lie at her breast. Instead, I was taken to a hospital.

The doctors did not think I had much chance of surviving. I was very weak and very sick. Nothing in my small body had a desire to live. It was as if I already sensed what a hostile world awaited me outside and that I would have to stand up to it all by myself. Without a mama to rock me to sleep or to

comfort me when I cried, without a papa to put me on his shoulders and catch me with his strong arms when I jumped off a wall. I had nobody. Only myself.

From the hospital, I went to a foster family. It was a poor family. I called my foster mother Mama Sis. She was around sixty, and she had six other foster children besides me. Not because she liked kids, but because the state paid her to keep them. The more kids she took in, the more money she got. But we kids did not see much of the money. The house we lived in was filthy and messy, we did not have much to eat, and we did not have any clothes except our diapers. The only toy I possessed was my tricycle, and I loved it more than anything. I was really sick and had to take a lot of medicine.

I longed for love and caring, but with seven children, Mama Sis was much too busy to give each one of us the care we needed. She was gone a lot, and I cried for hours. And then, on April 7, 1976, shortly before my third birthday, I met my adoptive parents. There are moments you remember all your life. My first meeting with Mr. and Mrs. Brown is one of those moments, and even though I was barely three years old when this dramatic change took place in my young life, I can still remember every detail.

My social worker came to visit. I had seen her a few times but did not know exactly what role she actually played in my life. She talked excitedly with Mama Sis, who nodded comprehendingly while repeatedly looking over at me. Finally the social worker approached me, stooped down, took both my hands, looked deep into my black eyes and said:

“Tony, we’ve found you a new daddy and mommy. The Brown family has adopted you.” I did not really know what to do with this information. But my instinct told me something was not right.

“Come along. Your new parents can’t wait to meet you.” New parents? My parents were Mama Sis and her husband. What in the world was going on? I looked imploringly at Mama Sis. Wordlessly, she stroked my head, gave me an apple, and took me in her arms. We went outside, where a big car was waiting.

And then I saw Mr. and Mrs. Brown for the first time. She was a stout black woman with long fingernails and lots of gold jewelry on her fingers, neck, and ears. Two of her teeth were capped with gold, a sign of affluence. She was wearing a large green dress and matching hat and looked as though she had just stepped out of Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

Mr. Brown was tall and thin and lighter skinned than his wife. He had thick eyebrows that made him appear somber and unpredictable. He was also elegantly dressed, but if he had worn a white turban on his head, he could easily have been mistaken for a terrorist. To a little squirt like me, they both looked threatening, especially since I just could not understand what these people wanted with me. They got out of the car, came over to me, and introduced themselves to me with a friendly smile.

“Tony, we’re your new mom and dad,” warbled Patty. “From now on, you belong to the Brown family. We’ve come to take you home with us.” I was completely confused. Take me home? What were these strangers talking about? This was my home! Here with Mama Sis! She was my mama and no one else! I clung to her, trembling like a little monkey, convinced that she would defend me against these intruders. And she surely would have, if she had realized that only too soon, the last name Brown would become a curse instead of a blessing for me. But she was not granted the privilege of looking into the future. She took my little arms from her neck, set me on the ground, and the strange woman grasped my hand before I had time to run away. Her hand was cold, her grip like iron. I tried to pull my little hand

away from hers, but I could not. I was too small and too weak. I was on the verge of tears.

"Don't be afraid, darling," Patty said to me, sweet as sugar, as she pulled me to the car, "we're your new parents."

"I don't want new parents!" I squealed and began to cry. "Mama Sis!" I threw her a despairing look and saw for the first time that she also had tears in her eyes.

"You'll have it good, Tony," she said softly, not daring to stand in the strangers' way. "Be a good boy." I did not understand what was happening. I did not understand why I had to leave. I did not want to leave! My home was here, here with Mama Sis, the only mother in the world I knew. And I did not understand why she would let anyone take me away from her. After all, she was my mother! I started shrieking and hissing. But what can a kitten's hissing achieve in the face of a lion?

Jeffrey opened the back door, and together they managed to get me into the car. A somewhat older boy was already sitting in the back seat. I did not deem him worthy of a look and instead beat blindly on the window with my hands and feet. I spit and screamed, but no one seemed to be impressed. Mr. and Mrs. Brown calmly exchanged a few words with Mama Sis and the social worker before getting in the front and turning to me.

"Tony," Jeffrey said, nodding toward the boy sitting next to me, "that's your brother Donovan. Your blood brother. We've adopted you both." I looked over at the boy who was supposedly my real brother. He looked to be about seven years old. His skin was much lighter than mine, almost white. He had curly hair and otherwise did not look anything like me. I looked him over and immediately threw my apple at his head.

"I don't want him!" I cried with fury. "I don't want him!" I began going at him with my small fists as if he were my bitterest enemy. And I was dead serious. I did not want a

brother. I did not want new parents. I just wanted to stay with Mama Sis. She stood in the doorway and looked after me sadly as we drove away. I stopped hitting my brother and pressed my face and my greasy little hands against the back window. Tears rolled down my dark brown cheeks as we got farther and farther away and my mama got smaller and smaller, until she finally disappeared from the horizon. I felt so terribly small and alone. For the second time in my life I had been forcibly uprooted, before I had even been able to put down roots, and I did not understand why.

Four years had gone by since then. Four years that had put the fear of God into me, poor little devil that I was. It was just the same for my brother, if not worse.

"I'm getting out of here," I suddenly heard him mutter above me.

I knew my brother well enough to know that he was serious. It would not have been the first time. Donovan ran away a lot, but every time, the police found him and brought him home.

"Dad will beat the living daylights out of you when they find you," I told him, but my brother said:

"They won't find me this time."

"But if they do?"

"They won't find me, understand?!"

"They've found you every time before."

"Not this time."

"But..."

"Shut up, little brother! They won't find me, and that's that!" I wanted to say something but did not. I did not understand why Donovan ran away so often, since he knew what he would be in for when he came back. I had never had the courage to do it. But I was just seven, and my brother was already eleven. Maybe in four years I would be as brave as he was. At the moment, just thinking about what Father would do to him if the police found him nearly

made me wet my pants. I knew terrible things would happen.

“Maybe our Mama isn’t really in jail,” I said, attempting one last time to escape reality, “maybe tomorrow she’ll come and pick us up.”

“And maybe she died a long time ago!” yelled my brother, trampling on my dreams to make me be quiet. I buried my face in the pillow and started to cry.

“She is not dead!” I sobbed, clenching my little fists. “She’s not! She’s not!” I knew she was alive, I just knew it. And she would find us and take us home. One day she would come to the door to pick us up, and she would be standing there, smiling. I was sure of this, and no one, nothing could tear this conviction from my little heart, not even my big brother.

### **3 Donovan**

The next day, Donovan did not come home from school. I knew why but was careful not to let on. When he had not shown up by ten o'clock that night, my parents called the police. I did not sleep a wink all night, first because my back still felt like a steamroller had driven across it, and also because I expected the doorbell to ring any minute and the police to bring my brother home.

But that did not happen. Donovan stayed gone, one day, two days, three days. I slowly began seriously worrying. My brother had never stayed away this long. Every time before, the police had found him with no trouble. They already knew this eleven-year-old king of the runaways, and they knew our address as well. Bringing Donovan home had become a part of their routine duties. The fact that they did not find him this time could mean only one of two things: either he had found a really good hiding place – or something had happened to him. And with every hour that passed, fear for my brother grew.

The evening of the third day, the doorbell finally rang. I jumped up as if I had been stung by a bee and dashed to the window. To my great relief, I saw a police car parked on the street. Two officers stood at the door, a small, dirty boy between them.

“Donovan!” I gasped softly. They had found him. I dashed joyfully from the room to greet my brother. But before reaching the stairs, I stopped and stood as if hypnotized. My father had opened the door and was very politely thanking the helpful policemen.



"This boy is an awful problem," he said, "we're about at our wits' end. As soon as we turn our backs on him, he takes to the streets."

"A little Tom Sawyer looking for a big adventure," said one of the policemen with amusement, and the other one added:

"We found him in an old freezer behind the schoolhouse. The way it looks, he spent the whole three days and nights hiding there."

"And he obviously had nothing to eat," added the first policeman, "on the way here he wolfed down at least four sandwiches."

"I don't know how to thank you," said Jeffrey, touched.

"That's all right. We were only doing our duty." They pushed my brother into the house and said goodbye. Father closed the door and waited patiently until the police car was far enough away. I barely dared breathe. I knew what would come next. And Donovan knew, too. He stood there with his head down, trembling like a lamb being led to slaughter.

The first slap was so hard that it knocked his glasses to the floor, and the lenses shattered. The second blow sent him to his knees.

"You miserable oaf!" yelled my father. "What were you thinking? I'll cure you of your bad manners!" He grabbed his shoulder and landed such a powerful blow that Donovan folded up like a pocketknife.

"Will you do it again?!"

"No, sir!" groaned my brother.

"Oh yes, you will!" He dragged Donovan by his hair, up the stairs and into our room. I fled into the bathroom and crouched down next to the toilet so I would not have to watch my father beat Donovan. But even though I covered my ears, my brother's cries went right through me. My lips quivered and tears ran down my cheeks. I would so like to have done something to help Donovan, but instead I sat on

the floor, intimidated, and started imperceptibly with every stroke of the cane.

It seemed like an eternity until my father left our room. I did not get up, out of fear that it might occur to him to take out his rage on me next. But a few minutes later, the one who actually vented his fury on me was not my father – it was my brother. It was not the first time this had happened, and I had never been able to figure it out. It was as if something took possession of him, something that was stronger than he was. When Donovan came hobbling into the bathroom and discovered me, I was done for.

“What are you doing, sitting there looking so dumb?” he yelled, even though I definitely was not looking dumb. He kicked me in the shin, and the only thing I said was:

“Stop! That hurts!” That made him even madder.

“Oh yeah? Does that hurt?” He slapped me. “Does that hurt, too?”

“Stop, Donovan!” I shouted and shielded my face with my hands. Without success. He started hitting me with his fists, kicking with his feet, and the louder I yelled, the more furious he got. In the end he grabbed my head, shoved it in the toilet, and flushed repeatedly. I wriggled and spit and had the feeling I was going to die. I gasped desperately for air.

“Now do you feel better?” hissed Donovan, and the water poured over my head again. He finally let me go, gave me one last kick and stood there next to me for a while, breathing hard, fists clenched, his gaze fixed on the floor.

“I hate him,” he said, grinding his teeth, as if to himself, “I hate him.” Then he suddenly turned around and left the bathroom. I coughed and gasped and collapsed sobbing beside the toilet, a little seven-year-old heap of misery that did not understand the world any more. What was going on? Why had Donovan hit me? Why did I always get hurt? What in the world did I do wrong to make everybody treat me so

badly? Even my own brother? Did he not love me? Did nobody love me?

One Saturday evening, when I was allowed to see a children's movie on TV, I saw a scene that totally confused me. There was a mother who hugged her little boy to her, softly stroked his hair, and said:

"My child, I love you so much!" I stared open-mouthed at this TV movie scene. I had never heard such words from my mother's mouth. Did she love me at all?, I wondered. I had to know. I needed confirmation that she loved me. Right then. I had to hear it from her own mouth.

Without hesitating, I jumped up and ran up the stairs. I found my mother in the bathroom. She was dressing up for a party. I knocked on the door, opened it a crack, gathered all my courage, and shyly asked the question so important to my survival:

"Mom, do you love me?" My mother turned toward me briefly, mascara in hand, appearing quite surprised at my question, and answered irritably:

"Boy, you know I love you!" Then she again gave her full attention to the mirror and her lashes. That was all I could ever coax from my mother on this subject. Nothing more. No hug, no kiss, no affection. Nothing. And yet I so wished to be loved like the little boy on TV. I craved it the way a withered plant craves water. I wanted to hear it, feel it, know it. It drove me crazy that my parents never made me feel like they were fond of me.

If only I could at least have earned their love. I would have done anything for that. I would have turned a cartwheel on a tightrope or would have done a handstand on my bike and ridden it through the neighborhood to impress them. I would have polished Father's shoes and Mother's jewelry every day until they gleamed, or the whole house, if they had wanted. But evidently I was not worthy of their love. My behavior did not meet their standards. Neither did my

performance in school. Whatever I was supposed to do to make them proud of me, I did not manage it, no matter how hard I tried.

One day as Donovan and I sat together on the school bus, he gave me a fantastic idea.

"Why don't you join the school chorus, Tony?" I gave him a skeptical sidelong glance.

"School choir? What am I supposed to do in the school chorus?"

"Sing, of course." I shook my head.

"I can't sing."

"Who says so?"

"Mom says so."

"How should she know? Has she ever heard you sing?"

"I'm not as musical as you, Donovan."

"What rubbish, brother. I know you can sing."

"I can't do anything right. Mom says nothing will become of me. I have two left hands."

"You don't need hands to sing." I made a face. Donovan's powers of persuasion were unbelievable.

"Mom won't agree to it," I objected, but my brother would not give up the idea.

"If you join this week, it might be just in time for the next performance. That would be something!" The thought of taking part in a chorus program attracted me. The school chorus was well known for its twice-yearly concerts. For each one, every seat in the big assembly hall was taken. Everybody came to the performances: parents, relatives, friends, teachers, students, even journalists. It was a spectacular event, one nobody wanted to miss.

"Come on," said Donovan and gave me a smack on the back of the head with his math book, as though this would make my decision easier. "I know you have the stuff for it. And if we both sing in the chorus, maybe this time Mom and

Dad will come to the concert.” This possibility made me prick up my ears.

“You think so?” I asked.

“Why not?” answered Donovan, shrugging his shoulders. My brother had been in the chorus for over a year, but our parents had not yet come to a performance. Somehow something always came up. But Donovan was right. If we both took part in it, they were sure to make time. And, I thought, maybe then they would be just a little bit proud of me. Just a little bit. Imagining this was exhilarating.

“OK,” I agreed with determination. “Count me in. Brother’s word of honor.” I held out my hand, and Donovan grasped it, smiling triumphantly.

Three days later I took part in my first chorus rehearsal. It was easier than I had expected. Actually, I really liked singing. It was somehow freeing, a kind of outlet for my most secret feelings. Obviously I was not as completely untalented as I had always been made to believe, at least where music was concerned. After the rehearsal, the chorus director, Mr. Ross, a short man with a wild shock of gray hair and glasses, called Donovan and me over to the side.

“I like your brother,” he said straight out, and turning to me, he added, “You have an amazing ear for music.” I had no idea what that really meant, but just the fact that somebody complimented me filled me with delight.

“Your voice stands out,” continued Ross. “You have talent, Tony.”

“Thank you,” I mumbled, embarrassed. I was not accustomed to being praised. But the best was yet to come. The chorus director laid his hand on my shoulder, fixed his eyes on me through his glasses, and asked solemnly:

“Do you think you could sing a solo in the next concert?” My jaw dropped.

“You mean...”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean. Do you think you can sing by yourself in front of three hundred people?” I

swallowed.

"In front of...in front of three hundred people?!"

"Didn't I tell you, you can sing, silly little brother?" grinned Donovan and pinched my arm. I still could not handle a complete sentence.

"I... I don't know..." I stammered. "My voice isn't really anything special."

"Oh yes, it is," said the director, "it is, indeed. Otherwise I would not ask you to sing a solo."

"There are bound to be a lot of people whose voices are a thousand times better than mine," I said, putting him off.

"Of course," acknowledged Mr. Ross, "all the members of the chorus have good voices." He paused briefly before continuing convincingly: "But you sing with heart. That's what I like so much about you, little man. You put your entire soul into the music. Not everyone can do that, especially not at your age. It's a gift that you've inherited and that you absolutely should cultivate." The professional musician had spoken, and now it was up to me to decide what I would do. Somehow his offer appealed to me, although basically I did not think I could do it.

"And if I get nervous and my voice fails me in front of all the people?"

"Do I look like somebody who would let you down?" asked Ross, giving me a wink. "I'll make sure you're well prepared, trust me." I bit my lip. It was so tempting, but for someone like me, this was reaching for the stars, and I really did not have enough self-confidence.

"Hey, brother, this is an amazing chance. I know you can do it." I looked skeptically from Mr. Ross to Donovan and back to Mr. Ross. The director's eyes twinkled expectantly. Obviously his trust in me was greater than my own. Finally I nodded, if somewhat hesitantly.

"OK. I can try it." The director appeared enthusiastic.

"Your parents will be proud of you."

"Do you really think so?"

“You can count on it, my boy.” His words inspired me and caused something to flare up in me that I had never felt before: hope.

My first chorus concert took place four months later. I was terribly excited. The concert was all I talked about at home. Our parents had actually promised us they would keep the evening free this time so they could hear us both sing, and that was an almost more important event for Donovan and me than the performance itself. Finally we would have the chance to show them that we were not the untalented, miserable failures they always called us. At last they would no longer curse the day they had adopted us but instead would be proud of us and maybe even praise us. Finally we would be worthy of their love. I could hardly wait.

Right after school, all the chorus members had to be in the assembly hall for the final rehearsal while the technicians tested the spotlights and microphones one last time. Everything was prepared for our big entrance at eight o'clock. After the rehearsal, there was a buffet with sandwiches and drinks waiting for us, and we pounced on it like hungry predators. Then we put on our long, dazzling robes over our school uniforms and waited behind the big theater curtain for the solemn moment we had been feverishly anticipating for months. I was as excited as a playful kitten and could hardly sit still. My brother, on the other hand, sat in a corner, strangely quiet. Something seemed to be weighing on him. I went over and crouched down beside him.

“Hey, Donovan. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Aren’t you excited?”

“Why should I be? They won’t come anyway.” So that was what was bothering him.

“Of course they’re coming,” I said confidently. “They promised.” My brother didn’t look convinced.

"They've never come before."

"Mom even cancelled an appointment," I reminded Donovan.

"Maybe they'll come for your sake," my brother mumbled and stroked the shimmering purple fabric of his robe. "But definitely not for mine. They hate me."

"What are you talking about?"

"Mom told me."

"Mom told you what?" I asked worriedly.

"Why they adopted me." He paused before continuing: "They didn't want me." I did not understand.

"What does that mean, they didn't want you? Why should they adopt you, if they didn't want you?" That made no sense at all.

"They wanted a black kid like you, not a half-breed like me," Donovan explained in a weak voice. I still did not understand.

"They wanted you, Tony, only you. But since, according to the law, siblings belong together, they had to adopt me too, whether they liked it or not. Not because they wanted me. If it had been up to them, I would never have been born." I swallowed. I did not know what to say.

"Mom told you that?" Donovan nodded.

"She said the day I disappear for good will be the best day of their lives. I'm useless anyway." He grabbed my arm and looked at me sadly. "Don't be surprised if one day I don't come home any more, little brother."

"But..."

"Children!" The chorus director's voice brought us back to reality. Mr. Ross clapped his hands and rounded us up. "Get ready, children! The curtain will be going up any minute!" We stood up and took our places in the front row.

"They didn't want me," remarked Donovan gloomily, "and some time they won't want you any more, either." I stared at my brother dumbfounded, unable to manage even one